

SATURDAY 5 JUNE

2PM & 4PM

LUCY GOULD violin
ROBERT PLANE clarinet
DAVID ADAMS violin
GARY POMEROY viola
KATE GOULD cello
TIM HORTON piano



CONCERTS 3a & 3b

CONTRASTS
BÉLA BARTÓK



STRING QUARTET IN
E FLAT, OP. 74 HARP
BEETHOVEN

Contrasts

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Verbunkos
Pihenő
Sebes

Towards the end of his life, as a result of the Nazi regime and the Hungarian government's sympathetic attitude to Germany, *Bartók* emigrated to America where he died in 1945, aged 64, of leukaemia. He never settled in his adopted country, and the more popular feeling of works during this final period (like the Concerto for Orchestra and third Piano Concerto), when compared to his more uncompromising compositions during the two preceding decades, is possibly as much due to his attitude towards the audience for whom he was now writing, rather than a heartfelt, subconscious 'influence' from American culture and music. His musical language is still heavily preoccupied with rhythmic and harmonic elements from his native folk music and images of 'night music' from the insects and birds of the Hungarian and Romanian countryside. Nevertheless *Bartók* was a great composer and these final works are wonderful in their own right, full of ebullience and colour, touching simplicity in the slow music, and with a direct emotional appeal. *Contrasts* spans the period in *Bartók's* life just before and after his move to the USA.

The three movements of *Contrasts*, written for the internationally renowned Hungarian violinist, Josef Szigeti and the jazz clarinettist, Benny Goodman, all have titles drawn from Hungarian folk culture. The work was commissioned in 1938 after a letter from Szigeti, who was already living in America at the time. Originally the piece was in two movements and entitled *Rhapsody*, but *Bartók* later added the third (middle) movement and adapted the title. The opening 'Recruiting Dance' has a proud, military tread and makes good use of the quintessentially Hungarian rhythm where the stress falls on the short note of a pair. The slow movement, 'Relaxation' is a haunting essay in night music. The final 'Fast Dance' completes the standard Hungarian folk coupling (slow-fast) with a riotous



dance where the violinist is instructed to imitate the raucous tuning of a gipsy band by taking a second instrument, tuned differently from the standard orchestral violin. The middle, more relaxed section, makes use of a folk rhythm, natural sounding, but irregular by Western classical standards (thirteen beats made up in a pattern of threes and twos).

The outer movements both feature a virtuoso cadenza, one each for clarinet and violin, giving ample chance for Szigeti and Goodman to show off their instrumental skills. In typically self-effacing fashion, *Bartók* included no such cadenza for the piano, despite taking part in the first performance of the complete version of *Contrasts* in Carnegie Hall with its two dedicatees. There is still a widely available recording of these three great musicians performing the work. *Bartók* was a superb pianist, and his performances of solo and chamber music were full of colour and nuance, although never extrovert or bombastic. His delicacy of touch and singing sound give the lie to his reputation for acerbic and harsh works. The soul of his music is always born from the rhythm and intonation of his native folk music and language, by turns yearning, free spirited, foot-stamping, impassioned, but never dry and rarely, on its own harmonic terms, 'dissonant'.

String Quartet in E flat, Op. 74 *Harp* Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Poco adagio – Allegro
Adagio ma non troppo
Presto
Allegretto con variazioni

Beethoven's String Quartet in E flat, Op. 74 (1809), is a work that behaves, at least superficially, as expected. There is an opening allegro with slow introduction, genuine slow movement, energetic scherzo and bright finale. This, however, says nothing of the work of perfection that lies within. The nickname *Harp* was not Beethoven's but was applied by a publisher in the unfortunate manner of the time. No doubt, however, that the wonderfully energetic pizzicato of the opening allegro does much to dominate and define its gloriously joyful nature. This allegro is preceded by a slow introduction, almost religious in its continual upward aspiration. The second subject turns delightful arabesques without challenging the music's contentment. The moment of true genius however comes in the coda, where the violin's arpeggiated figuration and a soaring duet in the middle voices lift the music to ecstatic heights.

The second movement, beloved of Mendelssohn, is one of unrestrained melody in the warm and comforting key of A flat major. Again, as in the first movement, moments of conflict are kept to a minimum amidst the tender tranquillity of the 3/8 lilt. The form is a sonata-rondo, a favourite of Mozart's, and the reprises of the opening theme are so heavily ornamented and re-scored that they are essentially variations. All of this contributes to a rare expressive freedom alongside a feeling



(perhaps pervasive in the whole work) of looking back to the masters of preceding generations.

It is hard to imagine that Mendelssohn wasn't also a fan of the scherzo, with its bustling *moto perpetuo*. The opening bursts in with a vigorous C minor that cannot but be reminiscent of the fifth symphony, but in truth the stormy character is short-lived and the majority of the movement dances with abandon rather than malevolence. In the trio section church bells seem to ring and, as was often Beethoven's preference in his middle period (*Razumovsky* Quartets, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, Piano Trio in E flat, Op. 70 No 2 etc.), the movement is extended in length by a second appearance of this trio. The final rendition of the scherzo finds its way back from C minor to E flat major in order to prepare a seamless transition to the finale, a set of variations on a graceful theme. Here Beethoven is at his most inventive and inspired (though he was consistently a master of this form) through five variations that subject the theme to several startling transformations. Only in the second variation, during the viola's dolce theme, is the original melody really recognisable in the background. Unusually there is no minor variation (although the theme contains a brief glimpse of C minor) – indeed no variation in any other than the home key. Beethoven has no desire to introduce discord at this late stage. In variation six the excitement builds with a surge in tempo and a driving accompaniment, and this final section becomes a combination of coda and further compressed variations before a throwaway ending. This is a work of ideal proportion, almost entirely untroubled, uplifting and aesthetically beautiful: not words that, for all his genius, one would always apply to Beethoven.

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